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AUTHOR Stennett, R. G.; Earl, L. M.
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ABSTRACT

A survey of 131 Canadian elementary school teachers teaching in open areas sought to discover the extent to which open education concepts were being implemented and to solicit their opinions about a variety of problems and issues related to implementation. The survey asked teachers to rate their current situation and personal preferences on 11 scales related to planning and organization and 13 scales related to provision of instruction. Responses to a 4-point rating scale questionnaire indicated that current practices of teachers with respect to organization and planning tended toward the "closed" end of most scales. With minor exceptions, teachers' personal preferences shifted somewhat toward the "open" end of the scales. In response to scales related to instructional dimensions, teachers indicated that current practice in this area clustered toward the "closed" end of the scale on six dimensions, toward the "open" end on five, and near the middle on two. Teachers' personal preferences were either similar to their current practice or shifted toward the "open" end of the scale. Strengths of open areas were identified as sharing of ideas, techniques, and materials; team teaching and cross-grade grouping of students; providing personal and professional support from colleagues; and capitalizing on the special strengths and talents of teachers. Weaknesses cited included noise and distraction, limits on spontaneity in teaching, and occasional disagreement between team teachers. Study data are appended in nine tables. (JD)

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R. G. Stennett, Ph.D. & L. M. Earl

Research Report 83-01

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OPEN AREA ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: SURVEY OF TEACHERS' ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS

R. G. Stennett, Ph.D. & L. M. Earl

Educational Research Services
London Board of Education

Although most teachers and principals endorse the principles underlying open concept education, a growing number of concerns have been expressed about the difficulties involved in its implementation. Teachers have noted a failure to provide in-service preparation, negative reactions from parents, lack of the necessary continuity in quad team membership, excessive noise and distraction, overcrowding, and so on. These concerns have led to an increasing number of requests to have walls erected in the open areas and thus return them to the status of closed classrooms.

In response to these concerns an administrative decision was taken to declare a one-year moritorium on any physical modification of open areas and, during that year, conduct a thorough evaluation of open concept education as it is currently practised in London. In addition to a review of the existing research literature, Educational Research Services was directed to: (a) investigate, using whatever data were at hand, the impact of open areas on students' academic achievement and (b) survey all teachers currently teaching in open areas to discover the extent to which open education concepts are being implemented and to solicit these teachers' opinions about a variety of problems and issues related to implementation. This paper presents the results of the teacher survey. The results of the comparison of student achievement in architecturally open and closed areas is presented in a separate paper (Stennett & Earl, 1983).

METHOD

Development of the Survey

Based largely on the work of Traub et al. (1972), a questionnaire was developed for teachers which included three sections: (1) a request for identifying information, current situation, experience and preferences, (2) ratings of 'current situation' and 'personal preference' on 11 four-point scales related to organization and 13 similar scales related to instruction, and (3) a free response section in which teachers were asked to give their views on the strengths, weaknesses and problems associated with open areas and any possible solutions.

The initial draft of the survey was reviewed by an area superintendent, a principal and five open area teachers in one school and, as a result, several changes made in it.

Administration of the Survey

The survey was sent to all 131 open area teachers on 14 February 1983. Teachers were encouraged to complete the survey independently and

were assured that their responses would be held in confidence. During the first week of March follow-up reminders were given, through the school principals, to all teachers who had not returned the survey by the 28 February 1983 requested date of reply.

By following these procedures all teachers, except those who were either on maternity leave, sick or could not appropriately complete the questionnaire for legitimate reasons, returned the surveys. The return rate, therefore, was essentially 100%.

Data Analysis

All of the data from the first two sections of the survey were coded directly to data sheets. The free-response data were reviewed by the authors, content categories developed and the responses of each teacher allocated to the appropriate categories. These data were subsequently coded to data sheets. All of the data were then keypunched into cards and verified. All statistical analyses were done by computer using standard programs (S.P.S.S.).

RESULTS

The high response rate and the voluminous and articulate comments made by the teachers indicate both that the issue of open concept education is of great concern to them and is also associated with very strong feelings. The authors would like to thank all the teachers who participated in this study for their candor and the obvious thoughtfulness and effort they took in responding to the survey.

Background

The 131 teachers surveyed work in 41 open areas in 15 elementary schools. As indicated in Table 1, most teachers (83%) work in teams of either 3 or 4 people in quads. The majority of open areas (74%) contain children at two grade levels and a significant number (21%) are triple-graded. Only 5% of open areas contain children who are all at the same grade level.

A distribution of the grades taught by the open area teachers is given in Table 2. Over half (55%) of these teachers instruct students in grades 1 to 4. About 80% of the classes contain students at a single grade level, the remainder of the classes being double-graded.

A distribution of the open area classes by size is given in Table 3. As indicated by these data, most classes (82%) contain more than 25 students. The average class size is 28.5 and classes range in size from 7 to 36.

Table 4 gives distributions of the open-area teachers by the number of years they have taught and the number of years they have taught in open areas. On average, these teachers have taught for 13 years and have had about 5 years' experience in open areas. However, about half of them (46%) have taught for three or fewer years in open areas and about one-fifth have had only one year in an open area.

Only 5 percent of these teachers requested an open area assignment and the majority (64%) would prefer a closed classroom. Twenty-five per cent prefer an open area, primarily a dyad (17%) and 12% expressed no preference.

Only 12 percent of the teachers have had any inservice training to prepare them for teaching in an open area. Such training was relatively superficial, consisting primarily of pre-service experience in an open area, brief visits to other open areas, professional activity day sessions, receipt of a system handbook or some combination of these. Teachers have acquired their expertise primarily by trial and error and learning from one another.

Teachers' Description of Open Areas: Organization and Planning

Teachers were asked to describe, in terms of a series of 11, 4-point rating scales, their *current situation* and *personal preference* with respect to organization and planning within open areas. The percentages of teachers giving each response, for both their current situation and personal preference, to each alternative for each of the eleven scales are presented in Table 5. The reader should note that, for each rating scale, the elements are listed from most 'open' to most 'closed'.

It is apparent from these data that the *current practices* of teachers with respect to organization and planning tend toward the 'closed' end of most of the scales. With minor exceptions, teachers' *personal preferences* shift somewhat toward the 'open' end of the scales.

Teachers' Description of Open Areas: Instruction

Teachers' responses to the scales related to the 13 instructional dimensions are presented in Table 6. In terms of current practice in this area, teachers' responses cluster toward the 'closed' end of the scale on six dimensions, toward the 'open' end on five dimensions and near the middle of the scale on two dimensions. In most instances teachers' personal preferences are either similar to their current practices or shift toward the 'open' end of the scales.

Since the data contained in Tables 5 and 6 largely speak for themselves, no further description or interpretation of them will be provided.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Possible Solutions

Tables 7, 8 and 9 provide summaries of the number and percentage of teachers who commented on each of several strengths, weaknesses and possible solutions for the problems they have encountered in open areas.

Teachers identify the major strengths of open areas as: facilitating sharing...of ideas, techniques and materials; facilitating team teaching and cross-grade grouping of students; providing personal and professional support from colleagues, and capitalizing on the special strengths and talents of teachers.

The major weaknesses associated with open areas, as identified by teachers, are: excessive noise and visual and auditory distractions; limits on spontaneity in teaching and restricted use of some instructional methods; the difficulty some children have coping with open areas; overcrowding, and the serious problems that arise when team members can't work together effectively because of differences in philosophy and expectations of students.

The solutions teachers offer to the problems associated with open areas center around: erecting fixed or moveable walls; creating and maintaining compatible teaching teams; limiting class size; providing joint planning time and inservice training; providing alternatives for students who can't cope with open areas, and providing separate rooms for special activities.

SUMMARY

As a result of concerns expressed about the difficulties involved in implementing open concept education, a survey of all elementary teachers currently working in open areas was undertaken. The survey covered the current status and backgrounds of the teachers and asked them to rate their current situation and personal preferences on eleven scales related to planning and organization and thirteen scales related to the provision of instruction. In addition, teachers were given an opportunity to give their opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of open areas and suggest possible solutions to existing problems. The resulting data are provided, without interpretation, largely in the form of nine summary tables.

REFERENCES

Traub, R., Weiss, J., Fisher, C. and Musella, D. Closure and Openness: Describing and Quantifying Open Education. *Interchange*, 1972, *3*, 69-84.

Stennett, R. G. & Earl, L. M. Achievement of Students in Architecturally Open and Architecturally Closed Schools. Board of Education for the City of London, Ontario, 1983 (mimeo).

TABLE 1 Number and Percent of Teachers in Each of Several Combinations of Teachers and Open Spaces.

Teachers/Open Spaces	N	%
2/2	13	10
2/4	6	5
3/3	3	2
3/4	33	26
4/4	72	57

TABLE 2 Distribution of Open Area Teachers by Grade(s) Taught.

Grade	N	%	Split-Grades	N	%
1	20	16	1/2	7	6
2	17	13	2/3	3	2
3	17	13	3/4	2	2
4	17	13	4/5	5	4
5	10	8	5/6	6	5
6	8	6	7/8	1	1
7	8	6			
8	5	4			
Special Class	1	1			

TABLE 3 Distribution of Open Area Classes by Size

Class Size	N	%
≤ 20	2	1.6
21 - 25	21	16.5
26 - 30	63	49.5
31 - 35	40	31.5
>35	1	.8

TABLE 4 Distribution of Open-Area Teachers by Number of Years of Teaching Experience and Number of Years Experience in Open Areas.

Number of Years	Teaching Experience		Teaching in Open Areas	
	N	%	N	%
1 - 5	19	15.0	80	63.0
6 - 10	27	21.3	37	29.1
11 - 15	40	31.5	10	7.9
16 - 20	21	16.5		
21 - 25	12	9.4		
>25	8	6.3		
Average	13.06		4.77	
Mode	14.0		1.0	
Range	1 to 35		1 to 13	

TABLE 5 Percentage Distribution of Teachers' Responses to Each of the Eleven 'Organization and Planning' Scales for Both Current Situation and Personal Preference.

Organization and Planning Scales	current situation	personal preference
1. Allocation of Students to Classes in the Open Area		
(a) students and teachers make class allocation decisions	--	1
(b) teachers make class allocation decisions	16	21
(c) teacher and principal/vice-principal make class allocation decisions	66	71
(d) principal and/or vice-principal make class allocation decisions	18	7
2. Time Spent in Class Groupings		
(a) for most of the day the classes in this area interact with one another and students are grouped across classes and taught by all of the teachers	3	5
(b) the classes in this area interact with one another and students are grouped across classes for some subject areas and activities	29	37
(c) the classes in this area come together so that one teacher can teach the whole group in a subject area	20	28
(d) the classes in this area operate independently of one another	47	31
3. Seating Arrangement		
(a) all students are seated together without attention to class grouping	--	2
(b) the students seated in class grouping without barriers	8	12
(c) the students seated in class grouping with barriers set up between the classes	72	31
(d) there are moveable walls between the areas	20	55
4. Scheduled Unstructured Time - in the Whole Open Area		
(a) students are free to move to any activity of their choice within the whole area for more than 1 hour a day	--	4
(b) students are free to move to any activity of their choice within the whole area for about 1 hour a day	1	6
(c) students are free to move to any activity of their choice within the whole area for about 1/2 hour a day	16	34
(d) time is not scheduled for students to move to any activity of their choice within the area	83	56

TABLE 5 - Continued

Organization and Planning Scales	current situation	personal preference
5. Scheduled Unstructured Time Within My Own Class		
(a) students are free to move to any activity of their choice within their own class area for more than 1 hour a day	1	6
(b) students are free to move to any activity of their choice within their own class area about 1 hour a day	13	20
(c) students are free to move to any activity of their choice within their own class area about 1/2 hour a day	47	54
(d) time is not scheduled for students to move to any activity of their choice within their own class area	39	21
6. Schedule of Activities		
(a) the schedule of activities in this open area is very flexible and changes almost daily at the discretion of the teachers	2	2
(b) there is a core schedule of activities in this open area and considerable flexibility the rest of the time	10	17
(c) the schedule of activities in this open area is fairly structured but does allow for changes at the teachers' discretion	69	71
(d) the schedule of activities in this open area is fixed and rarely changes	19	9
7. Rule Making		
(a) rules for student conduct are made by the students	1	1
(b) rules for student conduct are made by the students and the teachers	41	51
(c) rules for student conduct are made by the teachers and principal and/or vice-principal	56	47
(d) rules for student conduct are made by the principal and/or vice-principal	2	1
8. Team Teaching		
(a) I spend around 3/4 of my time team teaching with one or more of the other teachers	2	4
(b) I spend around 1/2 of my time team teaching with one or more of the other teachers	5	14
(c) I spend around 1/4 of my time teaching with one or more of the other teachers	31	53
(d) I spend none of my time teaching with one or more of the other teachers	62	29

TABLE 5 - Continued

Organization and Planning Skills	current situation	personal preference
9. Joint Planning Time		
(a) the teachers in this area have scheduled joint planning time 4-5 days a week	2	16
(b) the teachers in this area have scheduled joint planning time 2-3 days a week	3	39
(c) the teachers in this area have no joint scheduled planning time but have scheduled individual planning time	76	41
(d) the teachers in this area have no scheduled individual planning time	19	4
10. Range of Age		
(a) the students in this area differ in age by more than 3 years	16	2
(b) the students in this area are in a 3 year age range	35	22
(c) the students in this area are in a 2 year age range	45	53
(d) the students in this area are all the same age	5	24
11. Vertical Organization		
(a) this area is non-graded with provision for differentiated rates of progress according to individual needs in all areas	--	4
(b) a level system is used in this area where a number of levels are specified in skill subject areas and each child moves through the appropriate levels in these subjects at his own pace	5	13
(c) this area has a graded structure but some students move to groups in other grades for skill instruction	16	45
(d) this area has a graded structure and the rate of progress is established according to grade level	80	38

TABLE 6 Percentage Distribution of Teachers' Responses to Each of the Thirteen 'Instruction' Scales for Both Current Situation and Personal Preference.

Instruction Scales	current situation	personal preference
1. Diversity of Programming in Core Subjects		
(a) several alternative programs in core subjects are available within the area for students in my class	3	13
(b) a few of my students go to another teacher in the area for core instruction but I provide several different programs in my area for most of them	13	26
(c) I provide several different programs under my direction	43	35
(d) the core program, with minor variations is the same for all the children in my class and is provided within my area under my direction	41	26
2. Diversity of Materials		
(a) a wide range of materials are always readily available in the area to the children in my class	21	50
(b) there are many materials within the area but they are not readily available to my students	6	6
(c) there is an adequate range of materials available to the children in my class in my section of the room	60	45
(d) the range of materials available for my students to use is limited at any time	13	--
3. Selection of Materials		
(a) student chooses for himself from among all the material available	15	17
(b) student chooses from alternatives offered to him by the teacher	34	41
(c) student is assigned material prescribed for him individually or as a member of his subgroup	41	39
(d) student is assigned materials prescribed to all members of the class	10	3
4. Decision-Making		
(a) the student decides what he will do	7	6
(b) the teacher and student cooperatively make the decisions about what the student will do	39	54
(c) the teacher makes decisions about student activities in the classroom	54	39
(d) classroom activities are directed by external authority (e.g., principal, area superintendents)	1	--

TABLE 6 - Continued

Instruction Scales	current situation	personal preference
5. Media Usage		
(a) teacher, textbook and audio-visual aids are augmented by media requiring physical involvement of the students, (e.g. programmed instruction, games, and role playing)	45	63
(b) teacher and textbook are aided by media requiring minimal physical involvement of the student, (e.g., films, records, radio and television)	52	35
(c) the teacher and textbook are the media of instruction	3	2
(d) the teacher is the sole medium of instruction	--	--
6. Student Methods		
(a) student chooses from alternative methods of learning	6	6
(b) student is assigned a method prescribed for him individually	20	35
(c) student is assigned a method prescribed for members of his sub-group of the class	62	54
(d) student is assigned a method prescribed to all members of the class	12	5
7. Pace of Work		
(a) student prescribes the pace for himself	2	4
(b) student works at a pace prescribed for him individually	24	35
(c) student is expected to work at a pace set for the members of the sub-group of the class	65	56
(d) student is expected to work at the pace set for all members of the class	8	5
8. Independent Study Time		
(a) more than three hours are provided weekly for independent study	3	7
(b) one to three hours are provided weekly for independent study	22	34
(c) one hour is provided weekly for independent study	27	34
(d) less than one hour independent study time is provided weekly	48	25
9. Objectives		
(a) objectives are developed for each student individually	26	35
(b) the same objectives are used for all students in a sub-group of the class	57	52
(c) the same objectives are used for all students within the class	17	12
(d) the same objectives are used in all classes in the area	1	1

TABLE 6 - Continued

Instruction Scales	current situation	personal preference
10. Evaluation Procedures		
(a) evaluation procedures are different for each student in the class	14	19
(b) evaluation procedures are the same for each student within a sub-group within the class, but differ from sub-group to sub-group	55	53
(c) evaluation procedures are the same for all students in the class, but different from class to class in the school	28	28
(d) evaluation procedures are the same for all students in the school	3	1
11. Timing of Evaluation		
(a) evaluation takes place daily	78	80
(b) evaluation takes place weekly	13	14
(c) evaluation takes place monthly	6	4
(d) evaluation takes place at a few specified intervals during the year	2	2
12. Student Participation in Evaluation		
(a) students have most of the responsibility for planning and implementing evaluation procedures	--	4
(b) students and teacher participate equally in planning and implementing evaluation procedures	5	17
(c) students participate minimally in planning and implementing evaluation procedures	53	47
(d) students have no role in planning and implementing evaluation procedures	43	32
13. Evaluation Instruments		
(a) no formal tests are used; evaluation is based on work samples and observation	31	32
(b) evaluation instruments used are developed by the teacher	36	32
(c) standardized instruments are used in combination with teacher-developed tests	33	35
(d) standardized instruments are used exclusively	--	--

TABLE 7 Number and Percent of Teachers Mentioning Each of Several Strengths of Open Concept Education

Identified Strength	N	%
1. Facilitates the sharing of ideas and techniques	47	37
2. Facilitates grouping for instruction across classes	34	27
3. Provides more personal support from and contact with colleagues	27	21
4. Facilitates team teaching	25	20
5. Facilitates sharing of instructional materials and physical resources	23	18
6. Facilitates the use of teachers' special knowledge and talents	17	13
7. Assists professional growth through increased interaction with colleagues	17	13
8. Facilitates arranging preparation and planning time	11	9
9. Provides continuity of instruction through exposure to program and students for more than one grade or year	3	2
10. Facilitates (allows) physical movement of students	2	1
11. Develops a broader sense of community in both staff and students	2	1

TABLE 8 Number and Percent of Teachers Mentioning Each of Several Weaknesses of Open Education, as Currently Practised.

Identified Weaknesses	N	%
1. The high noise level and number of visual and auditory distractions interfere with the instructional process.	77	61
2. The need to select and coordinate activities to avoid interference with other teachers limits spontaneity and the use of some instructional methods (e.g. choral reading, ETV, etc.)	52	41
3. Some children have difficulty with, or simply can't cope with, the unavoidable noise and distractions.	43	34
4. If teachers don't share the same educational philosophy and standards of discipline or for personal reasons cannot work well together, the situation becomes very stressful.	36	28
5. The quads are overcrowded and storage space is limited.	34	27
6. Disruptions are more frequent. (E.g., one child can disrupt the whole quad.)	8	6
7. Teachers lose all privacy.	4	3
8. At the intermediate level, rotary time-table commitments make team teaching difficult.	4	3
9. No joint planning time is provided.	4	3
10. Evaluation is more difficult because students have more than one teacher.	1	1

TABLE 9 Number and Percent of Teachers Suggesting Each of Various Solutions to the Current Problems Associated With Open Areas.

Possible Solutions	N	%
1. Select teachers so that they can work together, i.e., share the same philosophy and standards of discipline, and keep them together.	26	21
2. Provide moveable walls or partitions.	25	20
3. Limit class size to 25 or fewer.	21	17
4. Provide adequate joint planning time.	19	15
5. Put up walls and doors; eliminate quads.	18	14
6. Select students for quads; provide alternatives for students who can't cope with open areas.	16	13
7. Provide inservice for teachers going into open areas.	10	8
8. Divide quads into dyads.	9	7
9. Provide separate rooms designated for special activities such as music, drama, art, ETV, etc.	9	7
10. Limit the age/grade spread to two years.	8	6
11. Have only three classes in a quad.	7	6
12. Give teachers the option of teaching in either an open or closed area.	7	6
13. Let quad members participate in the selection of new team members.	6	5
14. Block times during which all classes in the quad do the same subjects or activities.	5	4
15. Provide study carrels and headphones.	1	1
16. Select teachers so that quad teams have a variety of talents and specializations.	1	1